Painters of Scandinavia

A Review by MAURICE FRANCIS EGAN.

SCANDINAVIAN ART. Illustrated by Carl Laurin, Emil Hannover and Jens Thiis. With an Introduction by Christian Brinton. The American-Scandinavian Foundation.

IT is not easy to give a definition of the mission of art that will satisfy everybody. It is much easier to make a description of it; but one of its messages —this is the right modern phrase, for everything and everybody must to-day have a "message" of some kind—is to express the national characteristics of the countries which the artists represent. It is true that there is scarcely a Scandinavian painter or sculptor who has not come, some time or other under foreign influences, but there are few artists who have been less affected, less essentially changed or made less expressive by these influences. Every Northman loves Italy; and the best known of all the northern sculptors, Thorwaldsen—who adopted Denmark as his native country—became at times as Italian as Canova; still, there is the spirit of the North lingering about his work.

It is evident that Rodin has cast the light of his torch on the Norwegian, Gustave Vigeland, and on the Icelander, Einar Jonson, but this cannot be said of one of the greatest of Norwegian sculptors, Stephen Sinding. Sinding just misses the power of thrilling you; and Thiis, the most important living authority upon Norwegian art, tries to explain this. "Perhaps it is because the purpose is too manifest and also because one treatment of the form is as a rule too fugitive, either altogether too bulgy or altogether too smooth, seldom penetrating and sharp." His "Two Human Beings" attracted unusual attention because at that time there had been in all Norwegian sculpture only one nude female figure and that one was Borch's "Shulamite." The idea was daring—the embrace of two passionate human beings; but, as time goes on and the controversy regarding the group has died out, one cannot help feeling a certain coarseness in the execution and an utter lack of that lyrical and vital fire which might have redeemed the action.

Christian Brinton has performed the task of making an illuminating and definitive book on Scandinavian art without attempting to be unduly critical. He three colleagues are sympathetic and expository and his introduction is remarkable for good taste, for well bred reticence and for the quality of telling us just what we want to know, in order to get the best out of this volume of six hundred and forty-three pages. To reproduce photographs of the most typical Northern sculpture is not difficult; but to represent such masterpieces as those of Zorn, the Norwegian; Kroyer, the Dane; Zahrtmann, who was also Danish; Prince Eugene, the Swede; Bruno Liljefors, the Swedish interpreter of animal life; of Fritz Thaulow and of a score of others whose appeal depends largely on their use of color, seems almost impossible and yet by delicate manipulation the symbols of color are here given. The curious treatment of light by the Dane, Jens Willumsen, and the mauve tints of Zahrtmann are missing. In fact, they could scarcely be reproduced even in color. The exquisite and homely interiors in which the Dane delights are more easily presented than the pictures of out of doors; but one must see the originals to appreciate the silver tones of Vilhelm Hammershoi and of Carl Holsoe and the splendor of the flesh tints of Zorn.

And yet for one who has enjoyed the charms of the art of the three nations, and even the defects of its qualities, there can be no regret that an attempt to give impressions of the pictures was not made in colors.

It is hardly possible that any other volume on Scandinavian art may compete with this. Additions may be made to it as younger artists arrive; but at present it is the one book that gives in the English language an almost complete expression of what the Scandinavian artists have done and are doing in their special vocations.

The book, too, has been taken seriously by its editor and its writers. Nothing is slurred, and there is no evidence of academic prejudice. No critic could write with a better balanced mind or from a greater knowledge of technique and the value of national atmosphere than Emil Hannover. Thiis, looked on by some conservative Norwegians as too "advanced," too sympathetic with the school of Edvard Munch and Christian Krohg, writes without unacademic prejudice:

"The Norwegians," says Christian Brinton, "espoused the gospel of naturalism in all sincerity, each pursuing his pathway with independence of spirit. That same tendency, which in Sweden initiated a school of synthetic landscape interpreters and in Denmark fostered a genuine decorative renaissance, aroused in Norway a different set of reactions. In particular it gave birth to a group afflicted with social and pathological sympathies. In literature this coterie included Hans Jaeger, Arne Garborg, Gunnar Heiberg and Knut Hamsun, and in art found its leading exponents in Christian Krohg and Edvard Munch. Robust and defiantly objective looms the massive forms of Krohg, while in the shadowland of an acute subjectivity lingers the solitary, enigmatic apparition of Munch."

The choosing of examples of typical Sacndinavian pictures must have been as hard as the problem of adequate reproduction. There can be no fault found with this, although naturally every student or saunterer in the galleries and private collections of Denmark, Sweden and Norway must have his favorites, either purely technical or because they appeal to him.

Owing to the generosity of Mr. C. Henry Smith, San Francisco—may his tribe increase!—it has been possible to produce such delightful pictures as the "Interior with Figure," with Vilhelm Hammershoi, Svend Hammershoi's "Landscape," Erik Werenskiold's "A Country Funeral" and Carl Larssons's "Portrait of Himself."

Carl Laurin had perhaps a less delicate task than his two coadjutors in presenting his survey of Swedish art, as the result of public criticism in Sweden seems to be more crystallized than in the other two countries. When this work was announced a Norwegian critic said, "It will be a battleground!" and there seemed to be a prophecy in his words for the love of art and the partisanship of art for artists is as vital in the North as any question of morality or sociology. The sympathy and knowledge of Christian Brinton and the frankness and lack of prejudice of his three collaborators have, however, strangely enough, deprived this assertion of its prophetical value.

Foreign Books

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toyevski material is proceeding rapidly. Last summer the Russian Government acquired a number of hitherto unpublished manuscripts by or relating to Dostoyevski. The story of how they came to light is not without interest. It appears that the novelist's widow was living in the Caucasus in a town which during the civil war was occupied by the armies of the Georgian Republic. She escaped from the city, leaving her papers in private hands. The matter was bruited about, and the Union of Georgian Writers sent a delegation to the regional Government demanding that the precious manuscripts should be recovered. The Russian Government, too, intervened, but all efforts were in vain. At the beginning of the present year the matter again came to the fore, and Lunacharsky, the Soviet Commissar of Education, offered a considerable sum to the person who would deliver the manuscripts to the Government. His offer availed nothing. The matter was then turned over to the Georgian Cheka (Secret Service), with the same lack of success. Finally the papers were brought by a certain Mgalobishvili to the Transcaucasian Regional Committee at Tiflis and sold to it for a tidy sum. A committee of experts examined the material and found stuff of great biographical and some literary importance. The manuscripts included among other things 164 unpublished letters written by Dostoyevski to his second wife; notes for his novel "A Raw Youth," and Mme. Dostoyevski's extensive diaries and reminiscences covering the period from just before their honeymoon to her husband's death.